

## **From Civil Unrest to Civic Awakening: Twenty Years of the Empowerment Congress**

Los Angeles was simmering with tension when Mark Ridley-Thomas won election to the Los Angeles City Council in June, 1991.

Just three months before, in March, Rodney King had led police on a long car chase before being beaten by the LAPD officers as a bystander shot video. The footage shocked audiences around the world, but many residents of Ridley-Thomas' South Los Angeles district saw the brutality depicted as merely the rare public airing of a common occurrence – a pattern of police behavior they had long seen in their communities.

King's beating was followed two weeks later by another videotaped atrocity, this one in the heart of Ridley-Thomas' council district. Latasha Harlins, a 15-year-old high school student, was shot in the back of the head by Soon Ja Du, a Korean American liquor store owner, after the two had come to blows in the store. Though convicted of voluntary manslaughter, Du the same year received an exceptionally light sentence: probation and community service with no jail time. The mild punishment enraged many who saw it as yet another sign of disregard for African American safety by the judicial system.

Exacerbating these racially charged tensions between residents and the criminal justice system was an economic recession. Thousands of the high-quality industrial jobs that had lured many to South Los Angeles from other parts of the country and the world in prior decades had been eliminated.

Ridley-Thomas and his constituents knew they had to act immediately, not only to maintain peace, but to build the community's political and economic clout in the long term. Even prior to his election, Ridley-Thomas, as executive director of the Southern Christian Leadership Council of Greater Los Angeles, had begun a series of neighborhood meetings to address local issues through participatory democracy. Early leaders of this effort included community activists Mary Lee, Denise Fairchild and Anthony Thigpenn.

When he took office as a councilman in the summer of 1991, Ridley-Thomas' constituents had access to a new set of tools to build a permanent vehicle for citizen leadership. They convened meetings held in the auditorium of the Golden State Mutual Life Insurance building –a landmark African American business—drawing initial groups of 30 to 40 community members.

Much of the attention then was directed at police brutality issues, which dominated the political climate of the time. The Christopher Commission on the LAPD had that year concluded that the LAPD's management had condoned excessive force by officers, and called for new standards of accountability.

But there was equal passion for more bread-and-butter neighborhood concerns as well, such as enforcement of building codes and zoning standards, street cleaning and enhancement of struggling commercial areas. The concentrated neglect of such standards not only eroded the often-precarious net worth of working class homeowners by lowering the value of their hard-earned homes, but also degraded neighborhoods by allowing nuisance businesses such as liquor stores, motels and recycling centers to dominate the commercial landscape.

Those early meetings were soon overwhelmed by greater forces. In April, 1992, a jury in suburban Ventura County acquitted the LAPD officers who beat Rodney King. Anger at the verdicts set off a wave of destruction throughout Los Angeles, with Ridley-Thomas' district the epicenter. Businesses burned and civilians took up arms against each other. The Councilman's district office was also set ablaze.

Those fires of 1992 ignited the civic resolve of Ridley-Thomas' constituents. Their budding neighborhood improvement efforts begun the prior year were formalized into the Empowerment Congress, with a straightforward motto: **Educate, Engage, Empower.**

More than 300 residents attended the first Empowerment Congress Summit at Crenshaw High School. Attendance at the annual summits grew rapidly, and the events now consistently draw more than 1,000 participants.

Empowerment Congress members identified issues in their midst through Neighborhood Development Councils (NDC) composed of block clubs, faith-based organizations, businesses, residents and commercial property owners. The solutions they proposed would have an impact beyond their individual homes and blocks.

For example, when an NDC got the city to close off an alley behind members' houses, they not only were able to plant gardens where others had illegally dumped trash, they also cut off drug dealers and prostitutes from working in those spaces. Collectively, these individual efforts also helped to cut criminal activity citywide.

Similarly, when residents raised concerns about illegal pet breeders operating out of homes and the overwhelming number of stray dogs and cats roaming the streets, the Empowerment Congress led the way to enacting a tough city pet overpopulation ordinance in 2000. As the Los Angeles Times noted then, "while the issue has been debated for decades, proponents have only recently gained the political clout to further their cause."

The Empowerment Congress inspired the creation of the City of Los Angeles' Department of Neighborhood Empowerment, guiding Councilman Ridley-Thomas to introduce the motion to create the department in 1997. By 2004, the new city agency had established a network of 90 neighborhood councils.

Many of those neighborhood councils today serve areas known by names resurrected through an Empowerment Congress effort, the “Naming Neighborhoods” project. Concerned that many distinct communities were lumped together as “South Central,” often with pejorative effect, the Empowerment Congress organized efforts by residents to research the history of their neighborhoods and discuss their shared identity and aspirations through block club meetings, area assemblies and workshops at the annual summit.

The result was the restoration of historic but often forgotten neighborhood names, including Chesterfield Square, Baldwin Village, Green Meadows and Jefferson Park.

With Ridley-Thomas’ move to the State Legislature in 2002, the Empowerment Congress’ emphasis shifted from the immediate neighborhood concerns that can be addressed by the City Council, to matters such as larger-scale public works projects.

Empowerment Congress members led Ridley-Thomas in the state legislature to successfully introduce legislation establishing health clinics based in public schools, to make it easier for families –especially those without cars-- to obtain medical treatment.

California’s state budget was a perpetual crisis during Ridley-Thomas’ years in the legislature, and during those years the Empowerment Congress annual summits were often focused on the budget. Legislators as well as the state treasurer and state controller participated in the summits to hear directly from community members how their communities were impacted by budget changes (or decisions).

In 2005, the Empowerment Congress determined that a more sustainable infrastructure was necessary in order to continue the work that had been occurring on a grass-roots level since 1992. With the articulation of this need, and the subsequent formation of the 501 c(3) nonprofit, the Empowerment Congress would transition from an organism to an organization.

After Ridley-Thomas was elected to the Board of Supervisors in 2008, Empowerment Congress members were vital in building grassroots political support for the new Martin Luther King Jr. Medical Center, replacing the hospital that closed in 2004 after reports of deadly malpractice. Empowerment Congress members mobilized in full force to win approval for the Crenshaw/LAX light rail line, a project that had languished for nearly 25 years.

Los Angeles today, twenty years after the Empowerment Congress, has seen remarkable progress in some of the areas that had been crisis points. Crime has consistently fallen in Los Angeles even during the current economic recession.

The LAPD is now a majority-minority department, nationally recognized for its engagement with the communities it serves.

The drop in crime has also occurred In South Los Angeles, where many new businesses also have improved the quality of life for residents. A full-service grocery market has replaced the liquor store where Latasha Harlins was shot. Ridley-Thomas' former City Council district office, burned in 1992, was rebuilt in 1996 as a Constituent Service Center, a "mini City Hall" with representatives of 15 city departments located at the site as well as meeting space for community gatherings.

Yet the deep, underlying distress prevalent at the time of the 1965 and 1992 riots remain. High school dropout rates, unemployment and health insurance rates are actually worse today than they were in 1965 and 1992. Income inequality continues to widen and the Empowerment Congress tilts against a broader trend of disengagement from government.

Just as the shock of the 1992 civil unrest jump-started the Empowerment Congress, the persistent challenges that continue in Los Angeles communities must sustain the drive to ***Educate, Engage and Empower.***